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ABSTRACT

Few studies have approached the subject of lying from a rhetorical perspective. Even philosophical studies have concentrated more on truth than on deceit. A central concern of a definition of lying is to recognize that lies must be examined both from the speaker's position and from the perceptions of the listener. Such an examination can be done from a rhetorical point of view because lying is essentially a communication act. For lying to be differentiated from other forms of deception, seven conditions must exist: (1) the speaker must speak seriously and rhetorically; (2) in saying "X," the speaker must believe other than "X"; (3) the speaker must believe something other than "X" while seeking to get the listener to believe "X"; (4) a listener must hear the speaker say "X"; (5) the utterance must be plausible from the listener's point of view; (6) the listener must take the speaker as meaning the utterance; and (7) the listener must find "reality" to be different from the speaker's verbal expression. Thus, lying is a judgment made about a speaker by a listener. A full description of lying, then, must take into account perceptions of listeners. (HTH)

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LYING: A RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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LYING: A RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Deceit has been studied from a variety of perspectives in the speech-communication discipline. Most of these studies have focused on behavioral characteristics (specifically, nonverbal indices of deception) and on linguistic characteristics,[1] but few have approached the subject of lying from a rhetorical perspective.

The issues raised in lying are significant for both the theory and the practice of rhetoric. In rhetorical theory, for example, if rhetorical endeavors have epistemic implications,[2] it follows that being able to define conditions in which the rhetor is lying should be an important concern. In rhetorical practice, the issue of mendacity is a vital concern for public decision-making. As David Wise wrote,

> The consent of the governed is basic to American democracy. If the governed are mislead, if they are not told the truth, or if through official secrecy and deception they lack information on which to base intelligent decisions, the system may go on--but not as a democracy.[3]

In either attacking or defending the influence of rhetorical discourse, theorists have focused chiefly on the difference between truth and falsity, on the question of the certainty (truthfulness) of the rhetor's proposition. An examination of

the literature on lying indicates that philosophers, too, have tended to approach the question as a concern with truth: "Paradoxically, the reluctance to come to grips with deception can stem from an exalted and all-absorbing preoccupation with truth."[4] In rhetorical literature, the usual approaches to the issue of mendacity in discourse have been either to assess the ethics involved or to assess the evidence and reasoning employed by the speaker. The result of focusing on the ethics of rhetoric is a set of disputes about the moral foundation for rhetorical acts.[5] The result of focusing on the evidence and reasoning employed by a speaker is a set of works on informal logic.[6] While valuable, these approaches seem to miss an important consideration, namely the description of what constitutes a lie as distinguished from immoral ends or fuzzy reasoning. The present study departs from those traditional approaches and identifies the grounds for defining deception in rhetorical acts by providing an anatomy of lying from a rhetorical perspective.

As will become clear, a central concern of that definition is to recognize that lies must be examined from both the speaker's position and from the perceptions of the listener. Seven specific and necessary conditions of lying will be examined.

THE LIAR'S CONDITIONS

Philosophical literature frequently serves as a foundation for rhetorical theory, and a natural first step is to examine

what philosophers have written about lying. In philosophical literature considerable ink has been spilled on the subject of truth but little attention has been devoted to lies, and the concepts that have been identified are complicated by dispute. It is therefore necessary to winnow out the important characteristics that have been identified if we are to produce an anatomy of lying. The winnowing process is based on a rhetorical perspective because, as Sissella Bok has indicated, there is a fundamental connection between lying and communicating (i.e., communication is a necessary condition for lying).[7] The first level of analysis indicates that for lying to be differentiated from other forms of deception, the liar must perform a positive speech act. Hence, condition (1) is the following.

(1) <u>The speaker must speak seriously and rhetorically.</u>

There seems to be general philosophical agreement that the first necessary condition for an act of lying is that the speaker must speak seriously. While it may seem unnecessary to specify that a lie is based on the fact that a speaker does, in fact, say something, the condition is necessary because there are wide ranges of misleading conditions often confused with lying. For example, a person who does not speak to dispel a wrong belief may be misleading his interlocutor but he is not necessarily lying. To illustrate, suppose that I am an agent for a foreign nation and further suppose that you advocate a policy of disarmament based on the belief that my nation sincerely wants peace. While I may know that such is not the case for my country, if I abstain

from correcting your mistaken belief, it is a case of my misleading you but I have not lied to you. As Chisholm and Freehan argued, "there are types of intended deception that cannot properly be said to be cases of lying."[8] To have a lie, then, requires that the speaker actually say something. Of course, "saying" something need not be limited to oral acts. A lie in the form of a written message or even semaphore is no less a lie,[9] but all lies share the property of being stated. For this reason, it is logically permissible to include nonverbal acts of deception as possible cases of lying since such positive acts fit the condition of saying something.

Embedded in this first condition is the dimension of saying something seriously. There are all sorts of speech acts which are not serious. If a child says, "HO. HO. HO. I am Santa Claus," we (meaning adult listeners) are not inclined to count that statement as a lie since we do not take the utterance as saying something seriously. If a colleague were to claim to be Napolean, we would be inclined to label him insane, but we would not be likely to call him a liar since the act does not count as something asserted seriously. As Charles Sanders Pierce wrote, "the assuming of responsibility, which is so prominent in solemn assertion, must be present in every genuine assertion."[10] It is precisely because we do not take the child's or the insane man's utterances seriously that we do not consider them to be lying.

To the growing list of elements explicated in a single condition, we should add that the speaker must be acting

rhetorically. This is a condition that philosophers have implicitly but not explicitly recognized. By acting rhetorically, we mean, as Perelman phrased it, that the speaker must be seeking to gain adherence to his thesis.[11] In the context of lying, to fail to succeed in gaining assent is to fail to succeed in telling a lie successfully, but to fail to have a rhetorical intention is to be producing something other than a lie. The speaker may, for example, be joking, playacting, etc. But lying has a rhetorical dimension: "since the author of a lie wants to be believed, he will have some opinions beforehand about the people he is speaking to and <u>will shape his lie accordingly</u>."[12]

There is a close connection between speaking seriously and speaking rhetorically since a rhetorical act is a serious act.[13] However, there are serious assertions which are not necessarily rhetorical acts. An oath, for example, is an assertion (and therefore a serious speech act), but it escapes being rhetorical because while it may have suasory force (as an inartistic proof) it is not an act shaped for an audience. Because there is a close connection, but not identity, in speaking seriously and speaking rhetorically, it is reasonable to conjoin the two in the condition.

It is clear that a liar must speak seriously and with the intention of gaining adherence to his thesis, but this characteristic does not differentiate a lie from any other rhetorical discourse. Therefore, a second condition is necessary

to lay out the anatomy of a lie.

(2) In saying "X" the speaker must believe other then "X".

While all philosophical definitions of lying include this disparity between the liar's words and his beliefs, it is a curious quality and requires some elaboration. If a lie is to exist, there must be a contradiction between what is asserted and what the speaker believes.

> No one, of course, is to be condemned as a liar who says what is false, believing it to be true, because such an one does not consciously deceive, but rather is himself deceived. And, on the same principle, a man is not to be accused of lying, though he may sometimes be open to the charge of rashness, if through carelessness he takes up what is false and holds it as true; but, on the other hand, the man who says what is true, believing it to be false, is, so far as his own consciousness is concerned, a liar; nor is the man in any sense free from lying who with his mouth speaks the truth without knowing it, but in his heart wills to tell a lie. . . . (Having) one thought in his heart and another on his lips . . . is the very essence of lying.[14]

In Augustine's view, as in the view of most philosophers, the act

of lying rests not on the truth of the proposition but upon the contradiction between the speaker's beliefs and his assertions.

In condition (2), the expression "other than X" covers an important issue. For a lie to exist it is not mandated that a speaker believe the exact opposite of what he asserts. In situations where more than one alternative exists, it is not necessary for the speaker to believe "not X" but only something other than X. To illustrate, suppose that I am a candidate running for office and that I believe that price controls will increase rather than reduce inflation, but I also believe that my constituency wants price controls. I advocate that price controls will reduce inflation even though I believe the exact opposite. I have lied. On the other hand, I may believe that tightening the Federal Treasury's production of money will reduce inflation and that price controls will have no impact on inflation. If I advocate that price controls will reduce inflation, I have lied even though it is not the case that I believe the <u>exact opposite</u> of what I assert.

That a speaker asserts something other than what he believes is, from a philosophical point of view, a necessary condition for a lie to exist, but the rhetorical perspective points to yet another condition.

(3) <u>The speaker must believe something other than X WHILE SEEKING TO GET THE LISTENER TO BELIEVE X</u>.

At first glance this may seem to be covered by the condition that the speaker is acting rhetorically, but there are a few

rhetorical acts that make it necessary to specify this as a separate condition. Without this condition, for example, it would be impossible to distinguish a rhetor speaking ironically from a rhetor speaking mendaciously. Irony is a particularly knotty problem for discourse analysis,[15] but for our purposes D. C. Muecke's definition is useful.

> Verbal irony is employed principally. . . as a rhetorical device--the ironist asserts a "falsehood" knowing that he can rely upon the listener to contradict it mentally by an indignant or amused counter-assertion, this counter-assertion with all its emphasis being the ironist's real meaning . . . .[16]

In cases of irony, the speech act gives every appearance of the condition of a speaker saying something seriously and with rhetorical intent. However, irony is defined as irony precisely because the intended thesis is other than the speaker's utterance. To distinguish lying from irony, then, we need to recognize that in lying a speaker asserts X, believing something other than X while wanting the listener to believe X.

From the philosophical literature, then, the anatomy of lying consists of (1) the speaker saying something seriously and with a rhetorical intent; (2) in saying "X" the speaker must believe other than X; (3) the speaker must believe something other than X while seeking to get the listener to believe X.

This philosophical paradigm recognizes the audience's

perceptions only implicitly. Philosophical analysis of lying is, as is often the case with philosophy, an analysis of the idea in the abstract, in a manner that minimizes the involvement of people in the activity. Since philosophical analysis takes a limited perspective of lying by dismissing the role of the audience, a fuller understanding of lying can be gleaned by examining lying from the audience's viewpoint.

THE LISTENER'S CONDITIONS

For a listener to identify an assertion as a lie, the following conditions seem to be necessary: (a) the listener must hear the speaker say X; (b) the utterance must be plausible from the listener's point of view; (c) the listener must take the speaker as meaning the utterance; (d) the listener must find "reality" to be different than the speaker's verbal expression. Each of these shall be examined in turn.

(4) The listener must hear the speaker say X.

It is self-evident that for communication to take place the listener must actually be exposed to the message. But this condition (4) is necessary to distinguish lying from forms of self-deception, from counterattitudinal advocacy, or from rumor.

A lie told to oneself is not a lie. Eck indicated that "lying is defined with respect to the other, and . . . it must be distinguished from the absence of sincerity which is a relationship with oneself."[17] When a speaker recites something other than what he believes and addresses that message to

himself, it is a case of the speaker engaging in a fantasy that Eck called "reverie." Such fantasy may be a case of neurotic self-deception but it would be unusual to call this a lie. "Reverie is the imaginary that is lived. . . . Reverie constitutes a dialogue between the conscious self and the deeper layers of the self that border on the world of the instincts. . . ."[18] The restriction that the lie be addressed to, and heard by, a listener other than the speaker helps to differentiate lies from delusions.

A statement made in the presence of other but which the speaker does not believe may be a case of counterattitudinal advocacy. In Gerald Miller's paradigm of "a rhetoric of counterattitudinal advocacy," the focus of concern involves a "disparity between public behavior and private beliefs" in which the "actual, intended" persuadee is the speaker himself.[19] In cases of counterattitudinal advocacy the "listener" serves as a situational condition acting as a suasory force in altering the previously held attitude of the speaker. In such cases, the audience is no longer a listener in the usual sense of the word. This concept is such that the speaker is probably not lying for while the speaker may be presumed to want to get the listener to accept a proposition and while the speaker is making a statement he does not believe, his real motivation is not to influence the audience at all but rather to fulfill the demands of a third party to the speaking enterprise. Consider a press agent speaking for a lying president. The press agent probably is not

acting to deceive the audience; instead, his motivation is to follow the mandates of the president that he toe the line and stonewall the issue under discussion. Such mitigating circumstances make it unusual to assess the press agent as lying; instead, the listener's ire should be aimed at the agent who forced the dimwit into mouthing outrageous verbalizations. Now it may be the case that in the process of mouthing the lie, the press agent may come to believe his utterances but as indicated in condition (2), above, that fact would make his act one of truly believing a false statement and therefore not a lie.

Finally, a secondhand report is not a lie. It is often the case that a listener hears secondhand that a speaker said X. The listener's response may be, "That's a dirty lie." But while slanderous rumor is reprehensible, it cannot be counted as a lie. The original speaker may or may not have asserted X and the listener is going on the secondhand report of some other speaker. Insofar as one recognizes the difference between the speaker's verbal expression and the report (possibly distorted) of a speaker's utterance, one is not justified in labelling the original utterance a lie. Rumor is a report of a speaker's verbalization; a lie is the verbalization itself.

In addition to hearing the speaker make the assertion, the listener must consider the assertion plausible.

(5) The utterance must be plausible from the listener's point of view.

Rhetorical analysis is concerned with the suasory impact of

messages on listeners and it is precisely because a lie can be believed by a listener that it is also suasory. Thus, lies can be as effective as truth in influencing listeners. That is what makes lies reprehensible. Were it not the case that the listener could believe the lie, there would be no danger in lies. Consider Plato's observation in the Phaedrus:

> SOCRATES: Is deception easier in matters which differ considerably or in those where the difference is slight?
>
> PHAEDRUS: Where it is slight.[20]

Sheer and obvious fiction is usually discounted as such without evoking the charge that the speaker is lying.

> The liar will not only have reason for not believing his own words, but will have some opinion as to their "inherent credibility," that is, their plausibility relative to the general information he thinks is available to members of his audience. If the listener is believed to be very foolish or very ignorant, the inherent credibility of the lie need not be great.[21]

Hence, the listener must perceive the lie as plausible if there is to be a condition of lying, but a sixth condition is necessary as well.

(6) The listener must take the speaker as meaning the utterance.

It is common for speakers to produce utterances accidentally

and such mistakes are frequently ignored or quickly forgiven by the listener. Only when the listener takes the words of the speaker at face value (as the intended meaning of the speaker) will he be likely to label the assertion a lie.

To illustrate, suppose we hear a speaker point to a dog and say, "That critter is a hog." We would not ordinarily react as if the speaker were lying. Instead, we would tend to assume that he was speaking metaphorically about the canine's appetite or that the speaker meant to say "dog" but through a slip of the tongue it came out "hog." But if we perceive that the speaker seriously meant his utterance. If, for example, he began to speak of pork chops as coming from the critter, we doubt either his veracity or his sanity.

Thus, only if the verbalization is taken as an intentional expression will the lie be said to exist. Finally, we come to a key element in characterizing a lie from the listener's viewpoint.

(7) The listener must find "reality" to be different than the speaker's verbal expression.

Discovering that we have been deceived by a lie produces indignation. I am indignant when I have been lied to because I had every reason to believe the speaker but I later find I have been mislead, deceived, duped, taken, had, etc. As J. L. Austin wrote,

> It is fundamental in talking (as in other matters) that we are entitled to trust

> others, except insofar as there is some concrete reason to distrust them. Believing persons, accepting testimony, is the, or one main, point of talking.[22]

So long as I believe the lie, so long as I doubt neither the utterance nor the speaker, I do not cast him as a liar. Hence, for a lie to exist from the standpoint of a listener's perceptions, there must be a discovery that the speaker's verbalization differs from the listener's perception of reality.

The decision to lie originates with the speaker but a complete description of lying takes the mind of the listener into consideration. In short, lying is a judgment made about a speaker by a listener. That judgment stems from a perception that there is a contradiction between what the speaker believes (or ought to be in a position to believe) and what the speaker advocates. The usual condition for rhetorical acts is for a listener to trust that the speaker is not lying and, therefore, the judgment that a speaker is (or may be) lying stems from a suspicion that a contradiction exists.

CONCLUSIONS

The consequences of lying are always negative, if not in the short term, at least in the long run. The deceived party looses faith in the speaker and may generalize that suspicion to all speakers. While the liar may gain initial rewards by having the listeners believe the verbalization, the long term consequence

for the act of deception is a tendency to breed further deception.[23]

This essay has attempted to establish an anatomy of lying using a rhetorical perspective. The conditions identified include: (1) the speaker must speak seriously and rhetorically; (2) in saying "X" the speaker must believe other than X; (3) the speaker must believe other than X while seeking to get the listener to believe X; (4) the listener must hear the speaker say X; (5) the utterance must be plausible from the listener's point of view; (6) the listener must take the speaker as meaning the utterance; (7) the listener must find "reality" to be different from the speaker's verbal expression. A full description of lying, then, takes into account the perceptions of listeners. In the process of identifying the nature of lying, I hope we have also made some inroads in clarifying the differences between lying and other discursive forms such as speaking playfully, ironically, etc.

[1]Mark Knapp and Mark Comadena, "Telling It Like It Isn't: A Review of Theory and Research on Deceptive Communications," Human Communication Research, V (Spring, 1979), 270-285; William Todd-Mancillas and Robert J. Kibler, "A Test of Concurrent Validity for Linguisitic Indices of Deception," Western Journal of Speech Communication, XLIII (Spring, 1979), 108-122; John E. Hocking, Joyce Bauchner, Edmund P. Kaminski, and Gerald R. Miller, "Detecting Deceptive Communication from Verbal, Visual, and Paralinguistic Cues," Human Communication Research, VI (Fall, 1979), 33-46.

[2]Gerard A. Hauser, "Rhetoric as a Way of Knowing," Today's Speech, XIX (Winter, 1971), 43-48.

[3]David Wise, The Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy, and Power (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 26.

[4]Sissela Bok, Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 5.

[5]See, for example, Richard L. Johannesen, ed., Ethics and Persuasion (New York: Random House, 1967), passim.

[6]See, for example, W. Ward Fearnside and William B. Holther, Fallacy: The Counterfeit of Argument (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), passim.

[7]Bok, p. 13. This view is contrary to that held by Frederick Siegler who argued that communication is a necessary condition for A to be lying to B but not a necessary condition for A to be lying. See, Frederick Siegler, "Lying," American

Philosophical Quarterly, III (April, 1966), 136.

[8]Roderick Chisholm and Thomas D. Freehan, "The Intent to Deceive," The Journal of Philosophy, LXXIV (1977), 149.

[9]Siegler, p. 128.

[10]C. S. Pierce as quoted in Chisholm and Freehan, p. 150.

[11]Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 14.

[12]A. Isenberg, "Deontology and the Ethics of Lying," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, XXIV (June, 1964), 466. Italics added.

[13]C. C. Arnold, Criticism of Oral Rhetoric (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1974), pp. 48-49.

[14]St. Augustine, The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love, trans. J. F. Shaw, ed. Henry Paolucci (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), pp. 21-22.

[15]David Kaufer, "Irony and Rhetorical Strategy," Philosophy and Rhetoric, X (Spring, 1977), 90-110.

[16]D. C. Muecke, Irony (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 63.

[17]Marcel Eck, Lies and Truth (New York: Macmillan Company, 1970), p. 14.

[18]Eck, p. 128.

[19]Gerald R. Miller, "Toward a Rhetoric of Counterattitudinal Advocacy," Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition, ed. Walter R. Fisher (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1974),

p. 281.

[20]Plato, Phaedrus, trans. W. C. Helmbold and W. G. Rabinowitz (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 49.

[21]Isenberg, pp. 466-467.

[22]J. L. Austin, Philosophical Papers, eds. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 82.

[23]Bok, pp. 25-26.